

This is my first “message from the director” to you all. My last month as acting director has been a wonderful and energetic one; meeting staff in our secure and community programs and administrative divisions; learning from you, the young people and community members; and trying to formulate a vision for the future of our new department.

A few things have become clear as I’ve done so that I’d like to share with you. First and foremost, I believe that we have the talent and drive within our department to reform it and make it a model for the nation to emulate – particularly if we work in partnership with the young people, their parents, the community, and other key stakeholders in the Judiciary, Office of the Attorney General, Public Defender Service, Department of Mental Health, Child and Family Services, Court Social Services, the Metropolitan Police Department, Plaintiffs and Special Arbiter, not to mention the Mayor’s Office and DC Council. There is a tremendous amount of attention being focused on our department, much of which I believe we can and will turn into a positive asset to assist in our reform efforts.

But we can’t truly reform our department unless we know where we’re going first. So first and foremost, I want us all commit to one guiding principal as we do our work – ***If I had the money we are now spending to incarcerate this young person, and this was my son or daughter, would I lock him or her up at Oak Hill or YSC, or would I find a more creative and effective way to turn his or her life around?*** If we truly make this our credo – to treat the youth in our care as if they were our own – we cannot fail.

How we get there is of course, an important detail. To really begin to treat young people like we would want our own treated if they were in the same circumstances, we’re going to need to do several things:

1. **Live by a second credo “Every Day Counts”.** If my job is to move a kid, *every day counts*. If I need to interview that young person before they can be returned home, *every day counts*. If the van to take girls to school is broken and they’re falling behind in their education and it’s my job to deal with it *every day counts*. If a kid is put on greenline and my job is to inform other DYRS staff of that, *every MINUTE counts*. That means I do it today, not tomorrow, now, not later. That means I get down to the bottom of my backlog of cases, because they’re not just cases, they’re human beings. Delay would be intolerable if my child was locked up in the kind of conditions existing at Oak Hill, so it’s intolerable for the children of other people. ***Every Day Counts!!!***
2. **Close Oak Hill and replace it with a series of small, homelike facilities.** The District’s official position is that Oak Hill will be closed within four years, the Blueprint YSA worked on and the Mayor endorsed is to stop using the current facility by 9/30/06 and I have committed to fulfilling that promise [more details on how I hope we’ll get there can be found in my testimony to the Council, on line at <http://dyrs.in.dc.gov>]. Several DYRS staff have toured the Missouri system where most of their facilities are no larger than 20-30 beds, and we are

committing to learning from their excellent work (which not only produces improved conditions, but rearrest rates that are a fraction of ours) and modifying it to fit our system. Ron Wormsely, head of secure programs, is going to be looking in-house for staff to open our first model cottage this spring; those staff will travel to Missouri, along with youth and parents, to be trained on and learn about their approach. Stay tuned!

3. **Create the nation's best continuum of care.** With the dogged budget work of our Chief Operating Officer, Brenda Emanuel, and staff from all DYRS divisions, we have submitted a request for over \$3 million to go out and purchase services right now to help depopulate our secure facilities by launching evening reporting centers, intensive third party mentoring, workforce development, extended family homes and several other models that will help us begin to create the nation's best continuum of care. During the next six months, DYRS staff will be at the table and involved in our efforts to design this continuum in collaboration with youth, parents, community partners and system stakeholders. I traveled to Santa Cruz, California, last week to tour their continuum, along with Judges Lee Satterfield and Anita Josie-Herring, Deputy Mayor Neil Albert, DYRS staff (or incoming staff) Mary Phillips, Mike Spaulding, Joe Strong and Michael Watts, as well as numerous staff from Ward 7 community based programs, and we came back with lots of exciting possibilities for DYRS to consider as we move in this direction.

Meanwhile, Randy Moore, head of court and community programs, will be launching the ReFam (Return to Families) initiative he named, made up of DYRS staff who will be creating release plans to move youth into these new programs, while Ron Wormsley will be bringing on staff to divert youth from penetrating the front door through his portion of the ReFam unit.

4. **Reduce caseloads and staff to youth ratios.** All the programs and site visits in the world won't help us create a model system if our primary workers – you – are so overburdened that you can't dig yourselves out from under paper or meaningfully interact with young people in a safe, decent and respectful work environment – something that hardly characterizes DYRS today. We are requesting over 100 additional staff right now in our budget and I have made it the number one priority of our incoming Chief of Staff – Michael Watts – to work with our deputy directors to help recruit a vibrant staff of go-getters to blend in with our current dedicated staff and form a formidable team dedicated to treating the youth in our custody like they would want their own treated under similar circumstances.

We have many serious challenges ahead of us. But obstacles are made to be overcome, we have the resources, the staff, the drive and the vision to surmount our challenges and make our new department the kind of place we all want it to be and that we would want it to be if one of our own were in DYRS custody. I look forward to taking this journey together with you.

Sincerely,

Vincent Schiraldi
Acting Director
Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services